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Technologies of Life and Death: From Cloning to Capital Punishment

Kelly Oliver, 2013

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Prima facie there is no reason that philosophy in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition should not admit of practical application, and Marx and Freud are exemplary in this regard. Despite the ethical turn in the late eighties, however, deconstructive criticism retains a reputation for an anti-realism and obscurantism that preclude meaningful engagement with ethical problems. Kelly Oliver is determined to avoid charges of ineffability in *Technologies of Life and Death*, where her first paragraph ends with a sentence beginning 'In this book, I' (p.2) and her introduction takes the form of an extended abstract. Her statement of intent announces an examination of the relationship between technology and ethics with particular attention to the processes of life and death, suggesting a focus on practical issues of fundamental importance to all human beings. The monograph is divided into three parts: Sex Machines (Chapters 1 and 2), Medusa Machines (Chapters 3 and 4), and Death Machines (Chapters 5 to 7).

Chapters 1 and 2 follow a similar and effective format. They begin with a contemporary controversy, the sex testing of South African athlete Caster Semenya in 2009 and the rapid growth of assisted reproduction into a billion-dollar industry in the US respectively. They then bring Derrida's deconstruction of a conceptual opposition to bear on the issue, *free-determined* in one and *nature-technology* in the other. Exegesis of Derrida is accompanied by a contrast of his views with those of another commentator, first John Harris and Jürgen Habermas and then Harris and Freud. Finally, a conclusion on the subject which favours

Derrida is reached. The lesson from the Semenya case is that the grown is as prone to borderline instances as the made and an ethical stance which fails to recognise the underlying similarity between grown and made, free and determined, will be at fault. The lesson from the business of assisted reproduction is that no matter how many mothers are involved in the manufacture and rearing of a child – Oliver points out that an ovum may be created from the eggs of two women, a fertilised egg implanted in a third, and the child raised by a lesbian couple – current and foreseeable-future technology still requires that the child grow in the womb of a woman and be given birth to by that woman. Here the conclusion is much more Oliver's original thought than an application of Derrida, and all the more interesting for it: before adopting an ethical stance on the difference between natural reproduction and assisted reproduction one should realise that both processes are subject to a high degree of contingency and that ultimately 'all of us are born out of the body of a woman, which cannot be separated from whatever that may mean for us' (p.73).

The impression gained from the abstract is that Part Two will link the initial concerns with birth (cloning and motherhood) with the subsequent concerns with death (execution), but, Chapter 3 digresses to the place of women in the *animal-human* and *beast-sovereign* conceptualisations, introducing Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009 & 2011). Chapter 4 focuses on two little-discussed works of Julia Kristeva, a catalogue entitled *Visions capitales* (1998) and the lecture "A Father is Being Beaten to Death" (2006). The respective exegeses of Derrida and Kristeva are informed, candid, and lucid, but in failing to connect the first and third parts, the second – which is about neither birth nor death – transforms the book into a collection of essays rather than a sustained argument. The exegesis of Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* continues into Part Three, where the loss of clarity and direction is exposed as Oliver addresses 'what Derrida "calls the globalization of the autopsic model" of

sovereignty in relation to the counterfable of the elephant autopsy' (p.139). Suddenly, we are deep in the territory of deconstruction at its most abstract and recondite, very far from the relevant, enlightening, and accessible discussions in Part One.

Chapter 6 resumes the discussion of technology, specifically that associated with execution, but the philosophical thread has been lost by this stage and her conclusion – that the animal-human conceptual opposition has been employed to justify violence to human as well as other animals – comes as something of a *non-sequitur*. The final chapter exhibits a return to the rigour of Part One, discussing Kant and Derrida's respective views on the death penalty, and the role of sovereignty and the sovereign in capital punishment. There is at least one analysis which is sufficient to dispel the claims of those who maintain that deconstructive criticism is worthless. Oliver interprets Levinas' emphasis on responsibility and the priority of the other over the self (the hyperbolic ethics advanced by Derrida) in terms of Kant's maxim of *ought implies can*. Oliver asks: 'What if *ought* implies *cannot*? What if our obligations always outstrip our intentions' (p.190)? The idea is that there are an infinite number of things I ought to do and that not only does my finite life prevent me from meeting these obligations, but that meeting one – donating money to a particular charity – often prevents me from meeting another – donating that money to another equally worthy charity. Derrida's aim is, as Oliver notes, to negotiate a path between Kant and Levinas.

The conclusion of Chapter 7 claims that a psychoanalytic approach to Derrida's ethics – entailing a conception of human beings as marionettes, influenced by forces beyond their control – can forge a link between ethics and politics. The proposal, which is both fascinating and disturbing, is regrettably made without supporting evidence or argument. Nor, as a conclusion to the work as a whole, is the notion of a psychoanalytic supplement to a

hyperbolic ethics illuminated in terms of the technologies of birth and death. Ultimately, Oliver fails to do more than reframe the questions she has discussed, and there is an absence of any practical engagement with ethical dilemmas. The fault lies with too detailed a focus on *The Beast and the Sovereign* and too little of her own contribution. As such, *Technologies of Life and Death* is a missed opportunity.

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